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ABSTRACT

The age-status system in adulthood was investigated, using a 58-item instrument which divided adulthood subjectively into three periods: normative expectations for various adulthood developmental tasks (marriage, parenthood, employment, retirement, etc.); the lower age constraints ("too young") for these behaviors. In addition, 22 items regarding personal and life history information about each subject were included. Two mailed response surveys of 1560 men and women between the ages of 25 and 55 years yielded 670 useable surveys. A factor analysis revealed nine meaningful factors including: (1) youth and young adulthood tasks; (2) maturity and career responsibilities; (3) norms for family events; (4) maturity and family responsibilities; (5) youth and career responsibilities; (6) subjective assessment of age; (7) prolonged adolescence; (8) retirement; and (9) length of education and career decisions. Age differences were of greatest importance; older subjects held more restrictive views on age norms and constraints than younger subjects. Attitudes corresponded with personal experience and decisions. (Author)

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AGE NORMS AND AGE CONSTRAINTS IN ADULTHOOD[1]

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One aspect of the developmental changes which occur during adulthood is how adults view chronological age as an influence on certain behaviors related to adulthood, such as marriage, parenthood, retirement, employment, and education. The influence of chronological age can be normative, as reflected in statements such as, "70 is the best age to retire," and "A person should be married by the time he's 30." Chronological age can also have a constraining effect on behavior, as exemplified by statements such as, "20 is too young for a person to be married," and "A forty-five year old woman is too old to have a baby."

The purpose of this research was to make a comprehensive study of the age-status system in adulthood, as discussed theoretically by Neugarten and Moore (1968) and Atchley (1975). Five issues were of critical importance: 1) to make a descriptive analysis of age norms and constraints; 2) to determine if age norms and constraints differ for adult women as opposed to adult men; 3) to analyze the influence of various independent variables and personal life history upon one's views about age norms and constraints; 4) to determine if the data generated have implications for stage theories of adulthood (e. g., Gould, 1972); and 5) to integrate the type of age differences found in this study with previous literature to formulate a developmental framework which accounts for age differences in views on age norms and constraints.

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Using previous literature, I developed a 58-item instrument to measure views on the influence of chronological age on behavior. These items concerned the subjective division of adulthood into 3 periods (young adulthood, middle age, and old age), the normative expectations for various adulthood developmental tasks (marriage, parenthood, employment, retirement, etc.), the lower age constraints ("too young") for these tasks, and the upper age constraints ("too old") for these tasks. Each particular task was stated twice, once in reference to an adult man and once in reference to an adult woman; thus, the instrument is composed of 29 pairs of equivalent items. In addition, twenty-two items regarding personal and life history information about each subject were included in the questionnaire.

The original subject pool was drawn from the Alumni Information Center files and the Classified Civil Service files of a large, midwestern university. The pool numbered 1560, and contained equal numbers of men and women between the ages of 25 and 55 years. Two mailed response surveys were undertaken which yielded 670 useable (i. e., 60% completed) surveys.

A factor analysis was performed; a nine-factor solution was chosen as the most meaningful. The subjective labels for each of the nine factors and the items which loaded highly on them appear in Appendix A. For purposes of this presentation, I have chosen to discuss what I feel are the most meaningful statistical analyses and results. (More detailed information can be supplied upon request.)

Using factor scores as the dependent variables, multivariate analysis of variance was performed on 12 age X sex groups, and 9 educational level X income groups; discriminant analysis was performed on 3 marital status groups, 3 parenthood status groups, and 3 surviving parent groups. Correlation and multiple regression analyses were performed between the subjects' age at parental independence, school graduation, marriage, and parenthood, and their responses to the questionnaire items about these particular events.

Results of these analyses are presented in Appendix B. To summarize the empirical findings of this research, as related to the five issues outlined earlier:

1) During the period of adulthood, chronological age exerts both a normative and a constraining influence on people's performance of various developmental tasks and behaviors. Such norms and constraints are fairly consistent, within the sample studied and as compared to previous literature on this topic. The mean responses to the 58 questionnaire items are given in Appendix C.

Some remarks and qualifications about the influence of age norms and constraints must be mentioned here. First of all, a large number of subjects pointed out that their responses represented <u>general</u> opinions about the behavior of most people; many subjects said that individual differences in economic security, career goals, and personal "maturity" were factors just as important as chronological age to consider when determining the occurrence of life events. Secondly, in general, lower age constraints were considerably more salient than upper age constraints; that is, subjects were more likely to agree with the idea that persons could be "too young", rather than "too old", to engage in certain behaviors. (Saliency is

indicated by the percentage of subjects who responded to the particular items; see Appendix C.) Thirdly, upper age constraints ("too old") were the most variant in their saliency. Certain constraints, particularly upper limits on bearing children and holding political office, were very salient; other constraints, such as the upper limits on marriage and divorce, were so "old" or were qualified or left blank so often that chronological age can be considered to have no influence upon these behaviors. (See Appendix C.)

2) With sex as a target variable, sex differences in age norms and constraints indicate that men are expected to assume career and social responsibilities sooner and hold them longer than are women. On the other hand, women are expected to assume familial responsibilities sooner than men. (See Appendix C; all sex differences are significant at the .02 level.) Such differences conform to social sex stereotypes regarding the appropriate sphere of influence for adult men as compared to adult women.

3) One's life experiences affect one's views on age norms and constraints such that one's attitudes are congruent with one's behaviors. (See Appendix B.) For example, individuals with post-undergraduate schooling feel that school graduation and career decision should happen at a later time in life than do individuals who do not continue their education beyond college. Individuals with at least one living parent of their own hold less restrictive upper age constraints on behavior than do individuals with no surviving parents. Individuals who are married or have children cite younger age norms for marriage and parenthood than do individuals who are single, divorced, or childless. However, the correlations and multiple regression analyses indicate that

personal life history has a relatively minor influence on attitudes about age norms and constraints.

4) The results of this research support the idea that a major mid-life re-evaluation of attitudes, values, and personality occurs during adulthood. Such a "mid-life crisis" has been hypothesized by a number of writers on adult psychological development (Gould, 1972; Valliant and McArthur, 1972; Jaques, 1965). The change in age-status (i. e., entry into "middle age") and the often sudden awareness of one's mortality may necessitate that adults modify their beliefs about the impact of chronological age on their behavior, in order to cope with their own increasing age and its meanings. Retrospective views of personal maturity during adolescence and young adulthood may cause older adults to hold more rigid views on lower age constraints than when they were younger. Since retirement marks the beginning of the "old age" period of life, attitudes about its age appropriateness may change also.

5) Age differences were judged to be of greatest importance in their influence on age norms and constraints. In general, older subjects held more restrictive views on age norms and constraints than did younger subjects. That is, older subjects viewed the relevant behaviors of this study as appropriate for a narrower range of adults than did younger subjects. This finding is consistent with previous literature, and these age differences were interpreted to reflect psychological change rather than cohort differences. The Neugarten et al. (1965) hypothesis of increased adult socialization and committment to social norms and conventions with increasing age was supported by this research.

In addition, this research has a number of practical implications for social institutions which deal with adults. The most important of these are that:

1) Recruitment efforts for returning adult students will be most successful when aimed at the 30-50 year old segment of adults, particularly at highly educated adults and adult women.

2) Educational re-entry will become more of a normative event during the adult period in the future.

3) Major job responsibilities are expected to be borne by individuals between the ages of 25 and 55.

4) Major political office is expected to be held by people between 30 and 65 years of age, with the upper age constraint being particularly salient.

5) Age mandatory retirement policies were (spontaneously) heavily criticized by the subjects in this study. Even though the early 60's were identified as the "best" time to retire, and people 75 years and older were considered to be "too old" for full-time employment, a large number of subjects stated that requiring all individuals to retire at a particular age was wrong because it did not allow for individual differences, capacities, or preferences.

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APPENDIX A

FACTORS AND LOADED ITEMS

FACTOR 1 - Youth and the Tasks of Young Adulthood

Items:
- 21 - man too young to leave home
- 22 - man too young to marry
- 23 - man too young to have child
- 24 - man too young to quit school to work
- 28 - woman too young to leave home
- 29 - woman too young to marry
- 30 - woman too young to have child
- 31 - woman too young to quit school to work

FACTOR 2 - Maturity and Career Responsibilities

Items:
- 3 - age interval for old adult male
- 6 - age interval for old adult female
- 37 - man too old to live by self
- 42 - man too old to quit work to return to school
- 43 - man too old to move family for job promotion
- 44 - man too old to hold major job responsibilities
- 45 - man too old to hold major political office
- 46 - man too old to work full-time
- 49 - man too old to live by self
- 54 - woman too old to quit work to return to school
- 55 - woman too old to move family for job promotion
- 56 - woman too old to hold major job responsibilities
- 57 - woman too old to hold major political office
- 58 - woman too old to work full-time

FACTOR 3 - Normative Expectations for Family Tasks

Items:
- 7 - best age for man to marry
- 8 - best age for man to have first child
- 9 - best age for man to have last child
- 10 - best age for man to be grandfather
- 14 - best age for woman to marry
- 15 - best age for woman to have first child
- 16 - best age for woman to have last child
- 17 - best age for woman to be grandmother

FACTOR 4 - Maturity and Family Responsibilities

Items:
- 37 - man too old to live by self
- 38 - man too old to marry
- 40 - man too old to divorce spouse
- 42 - man too old to quit work to return to school
- 43 - man too old to move family for job promotion
- 49 - woman too old to live by self
- 50 - woman too old to marry
- 52 - woman too old to divorce spouse
- 54 - woman too old to quit work to return to school
- 55 - woman too old to move family for job promotion

APPENDIX A

(cont.)

FACTOR 5 - Youth and Career Responsibilities

Items: 26 - man too young to hold major job responsibilities
27 - man too young to hold major political office
33 - woman too young to hold major job responsibilities
34 - woman too young to hold major political office

FACTOR 6 - Subjective Assessment of Age

Items: 1 - age interval for young adult male
2 - age interval for middle aged male
3 - age interval for old adult male
4 - age interval for young adult female
5 - age interval for middle aged female
6 - age interval for old adult female

FACTOR 7 - Prolonged Adolescence

Items: 35 - man too old to live with parents
36 - man too old to seek parental advice
41 - man too old to continue school without working
47 - woman too old to live with parents
48 - woman too old to seek parental advice
53 - woman too old to continue school without working

FACTOR 8 - Retirement

Items: 13 - best age for man to retire
20 - best age for woman to retire
25 - man too young to retire
32 - woman too young to retire

FACTOR 9 - Length of Education and Career Decisions

Items: 11 - best age for man to finish school and start work
12 - best age for man to settle on career
18 - best age for woman to finish school and start work
19 - best age for woman to settle on career
41 - man too old to continue school without working
53 - woman too old to continue school without working

APPENDIX B

INFLUENCE OF SELECTED INDEPENDENT VARIABLES ON AGE NORMS AND CONSTRAINTS

(significant results only)

ANALYSES PERFORMED WITH FACTOR SCORES AS DEPENDENT VARIABLES--MANOVA

A. AGE X SEX (6 age ranges (25-55 yrs.) X 2 sexes)

1. Age - main effect significant ($F=2.24$; $p<.001$)
   a. 25-40 years of age (n=323) gave sig. higher responses on factors
      #4 ($F=6.03$; $p<.001$)
      #9 ($F=3.34$; $p<.005$)
   b. 41-55 years of age (n=347) gave significantly higher responses on factors
      #1 ($F=2.77$; $p<.017$)
      #8 ($F=3.06$; $p<.010$)
2. Sex - main effect significant ($F=14.00$; $p<.001$)
   a. Men (n=301) gave sig. higher responses on factors
      #1 ($F=6.20$; $p<.013$)
      #7 ($F=9.64$; $p<.002$)
      #9 ($F=15.86$; $p<.001$)
   b. Women (n=369) gave sig. higher responses on factors
      #2 ($F=13.01$; $p<.001$)
      #3 ($F=26.42$; $p<.001$)
      #4 ($F=24.72$; $p<.001$)
      #8 ($F=7.06$; $p<.008$)
3. No significant interactions

B. EDUCATIONAL LEVEL X INCOME (3 ed. groups X 3 income groups)

1. Educational Level - main effect significant ($F=5.31$; $p<.001$)
   a. Ss with education past high school (2 groups; n=555) gave sig. higher responses to factor
      #2 ($F=31.39$; $p<.001$)
   b. Ss with education past college (n=233) gave sig. higher responses to factor
      #9 ($F=5.55$; $p<.004$)
2. Income Level - not significant
3. No significant interactions

ANALYSES PERFORMED WITH FACTOR SCORES AS DEPENDENT VARIABLES--
DISCRIMINANT ANALYSIS

A. MARITAL STATUS - one significant discriminant function (X^2=38.59; df=5; p<.001)

1. Factor #3 sig. discriminated among 3 groups;

   a. Ss married only once (n=490) had sig. lower mean scores.

   b. Never-marrieds (n=71) and divorced/widowed Ss (n=109) had sig. higher mean scores.

B. NUMBER OF CHILDREN - one significant discriminant function (X^2=56.45; df=5; p<.001)

1. Factors #1 and #3 sig. discriminated among 3 groups ;

   a. Ss with no children (n=153) had sig. higher mean scores on factor #3 and lower mean scores on factor #1.

   b. Ss with children at home (n=419) and "empty nest" Ss (n=98) had sig. higher mean scores on factor #1 and lower mean scores on factor #3.

C. NUMBER OF SURVIVING PARENTS - one significant discriminant function (X^2=21.02; df=5; p<.001)

1. Factors #2, 4, and 7 sig. discriminated among 3 groups;

   a. Ss with no living parents (n=125) had sig. higher mean scores on factor #7 and lower mean scores on factors #2 and #4.

   b. Ss with one (n=235) or two (n=309) living parents had sig. higher mean scores on factors #2 and #4 and lower mean scores on factor #7.

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RESPONSES TO INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS AND PERSONAL LIFE HISTORY ITEMS (significant at p<.01)

A. AGE AT PARENTAL INDEPENDENCE (n=637)

Item #	r
21	.138
28	.111
35	.106
47	.114

B. AGE AT SCHOOL GRADUATION (n=656)

Item #	r
11	.143
18	.152
53	.108

C. AGE AT MARRIAGE (n=599)

Item #	r
7	.197
14	.168

D. AGE AT BIRTH OF FIRST CHILD (n-517)

Item #	r
8	.135
9	.120
10	.179
15	.178
16	.142
17	.201
51	.108

E. AGE AT BIRTH OF LAST CHILD (n=418)

Item #	r
9	.187
16	.197
17	.130

APPENDIX C

OVERALL MEAN RESPONSE TO 58 DEPENDENT ITEMS

(N = 670)

Item Nos.	Description of Item-Pair	For an "Adult Man" (years)	% of Sample Resp.	For an "Adult Woman" (years)	% of Sample Resp.
1,4	Interval for Young-Adulthood	18-27	99.7	18-26	99.7
2,5	Interval for Middle Age	40-56	99.0	40-55	98.8
3,6	Interval for Old Adulthood	65-81	98.5	65-81	98.5
7,14	Best Age to Marry	24.61	99.6	23.09	99.4
8,15	Best Age for First Child	26.94	99.6	25.23	98.8
9,16	Best Age for Last Child	36.37	99.3	33.75	98.5
10,17	Best Age for First Grandchild	52.38	99.1	51.36	98.7
11,18	Best Age to Finish School	22.90	99.0	22.45	98.4
12,19	Best Age to Decide Career	24.93	99.3	24.11	98.2
13,20	Best Age to Retire	64.08	98.4	62.46	98.1
21,28	Too Young to Leave Home	16.17	99.4	16.51	98.5
22,29	Too Young to Marry	19.14	99.4	18.61	99.3
23,30	Too Young to Have Child	19.91	98.5	19.21	99.4
24,31	Too Young to Quit School	17.83	98.5	17.61	99.6
25,32	Too Young to Retire	55.03	96.7	54.42	95.8
26,33	Too Young for Major Job Resp.	23.23	97.6	23.71	97.5
27,34	Too Young to Hold Polit. Off.	26.12	98.5	26.45	98.8
35,47	Too Old to Live at Home	24.90	94.8	23.20	94.2
36,48	Too Old for Parental Advice	28.25	95.8	34.90	96.0
37,49	Too Old to Live By Self	80.45	92.1	78.66	91.6
38,50	Too Old to Marry	84.34	87.7	83.66	87.3
39,51	Too Old to Have Child	46.00	95.7	40.31	98.5
40,52	Too Old to Divorce Spouse	59.85	81.5	59.34	81.8
41,53	Too Old to Continue School	28.41	95.8	28.73	94.2
42,54	Too Old to Return to School	54.72	90.1	55.77	89.1
43,55	Too Old to Move Family for Job	54.85	92.4	51.84	92.7
44,56	Too Old for Major Job Resp.	59.56	92.1	57.93	93.1
45,57	Too Old for Major Polit. Off.	69.50	97.6	68.38	96.6
46,58	Too Old to Work Full-Time	73.60	93.9	71.70	94.2